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Software Developer, Cybersecurity Analyst.

Population, GDP, and Systemic Power in Africa South of the Sahara

A Data-Based Reassessment of Population Growth and Aggregate Economic Mass (1950–2024)

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About The Author

Djibril Chimère Diaw

Software Developer, Cybersecurity Analyst.

Dedication

To

my mother Marème Fall

my father Amadou Chimère Diaw

my wife Isabelle Diaw

my children

Fatou-Chimère Diaw, Ahmadou-Chimère Diaw,

Marième-Chimère Diaw, Aïssata-Chimère Diaw .

my grandparents

Fatou Methiour Ndiaye & Waly Sega Fall

Fatou Faye & Souleymane Chimère Diaw

Teachers

To those who shall come into the world a century after me, beginning in the year two thousand and seventy-two.

To all mothers,
to those who made our coming into the world possible through the gift of themselves,
to those who, even today, carry, give birth to, nourish, protect, and raise life,
to those who, tomorrow, will continue to open the path of human existence.

To all women who, in silence or in light, have risked their bodies, their strength, and sometimes their lives so that humanity may endure.
To their quiet courage, their daily resilience, and their founding love.

May this work stand as an act of recognition,
a tribute passed on from generation to generation,
and a word of gratitude addressed to those without whom nothing would have been, nothing is, and nothing will be.

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ENGLISH

Editorial Preface

This volume emerges from a simple but demanding intellectual commitment: to return to the data, to read them carefully, and to allow them to challenge inherited narratives about Africa’s place in the global economic and demographic order.

For decades, dominant analytical frameworks have portrayed Africa south of the Sahara primarily through the lenses of deficiency and delay—low income levels, rapid population growth, and structural marginality. These representations, often reinforced by selective indicators and fragmented comparisons, have shaped both academic discourse and policy imagination. Yet they rarely ask a more fundamental question: what does Africa represent when it is analyzed not as a collection of isolated nation-states, but as a regional aggregate embedded in the long-term evolution of the world economy and global population?

The contributions brought together in this book adopt a deliberately empirical and systemic approach. Drawing exclusively on authoritative international sources—most notably the World Bank and the United Nations—they examine population dynamics, aggregate economic mass, and their historical interaction over extended time horizons. In doing so, they reveal a set of stylized facts that remain largely absent from mainstream literature: periods during which the combined GDP of Africa south of the Sahara exceeded that of major Asian economies, and demographic trajectories that position the region at the center of twenty-first-century global population growth.

These findings do not invite simplistic conclusions, nor do they seek to replace one deterministic narrative with another. Rather, they call for a reconfiguration of analytical perspective. They suggest that the relationship between population, production, and systemic power cannot be reduced to per capita measures alone, nor understood without attention to historical sequencing, institutional structures, and modes of global integration.

By juxtaposing demographic evidence with aggregate economic data, this volume contributes to a more balanced and historically grounded understanding of Africa’s trajectory. It challenges the reader to reconsider what constitutes economic significance, how systemic weight is formed, and why certain regions are persistently misread when analytical scales are poorly chosen.

Ultimately, this book is an invitation—to scholars, students, and policymakers alike—to think differently about Africa south of the Sahara: not as a peripheral exception to global trends, but as a central actor whose past, present, and future are inseparable from the evolving structure of the world system.

General Introduction

The relationship between demographic dynamics and economic performance constitutes one of the oldest—and also one of the most ideologically charged—axes of international macroeconomic analysis. In the case of Africa south of the Sahara, this relationship has long been interpreted through a reductive prism: that of rapid demographic growth perceived as a structural obstacle to wealth accumulation, productive transformation, and systemic integration into the global economy.

This dominant reading rests on two analytical conventions that are rarely made explicit. First, it privileges almost exclusively per capita indicators, particularly GDP per capita, at the expense of total economic mass. Second, it fragments the African space into isolated national units, while comparing these units to integrated continental economies such as India or China. This dual methodological bias has contributed to rendering invisible the real macroeconomic trajectory of Africa south of the Sahara as a regional aggregate.

The ambition of this work is to break with this analytical tradition. Relying exclusively on international institutional sources—the World Bank and the United Nations—and adopting a strictly empirical approach, it proposes a systemic reinterpretation of the joint evolution of population and aggregate gross domestic product in Africa south of the Sahara over the long run. This reinterpretation seeks neither to idealize nor to minimize the continent’s structural challenges, but to restore a historically verifiable macroeconomic reality that is largely absent from dominant narratives.

The stakes extend beyond mere statistical correction. What is at issue is the re-grounding, on rigorous empirical bases, of the question of Africa’s real economic weight within the global system, the meaning of its demographic dynamics, and the conditions under which human mass does—or does not—become an economic and systemic force.

Population, GDP, and the Systemic Trajectory of Africa South of the Sahara (1950–2024)

An Empirical Reassessment of the Relationship Between Demographic Dynamics and Aggregate Economic Mass

Abstract

The dominant economic literature frequently analyzes the relationship between population and production in Africa south of the Sahara through per capita indicators or comparisons between individual nation-states. This approach tends to obscure the macroeconomic trajectory of the region when considered as an institutional aggregate. Drawing on official data from the World Bank (nominal GDP, indicator NY.GDP.MKTP.CD) and the United Nations (World Population Prospects 2024), this article offers a joint analysis of population and aggregate GDP trends in Africa south of the Sahara over the period 1950–2024.

The results show that, contrary to prevailing narratives, African demographic growth did not prevent the formation of a globally significant economic mass. Between 1976 and 1998, and again episodically in the mid-2000s, the combined GDP of Africa south of the Sahara exceeded that of India; between 1976 and 1991 (with the exception of 1989), it also exceeded that of China. These empirical findings invite a critical reassessment of the commonly assumed relationship between demographic growth and African economic weakness, and open the way for a systemic analysis of development trajectories.

Keywords: Africa south of the Sahara; population; nominal GDP; regional aggregates; World Bank; United Nations; comparative economic trajectories.

1. Introduction

The relationship between demographic growth and economic performance constitutes one of the oldest and most structuring debates in the social sciences. In the African case, this relationship is frequently framed in terms of imbalance: rapid population growth is assumed to be mechanically associated with weak production, capital dilution, and long-term marginalization in the global economy.

This representation, however, rests on two analytical choices that are rarely questioned. First, it privileges per capita GDP comparisons at the expense of total economic mass. Second, it compares individual African nation-states with large continental economies, without examining the aggregate economic weight of Africa south of the Sahara as a coherent regional entity within international statistics.

This article adopts a different perspective. It raises a simple but rarely explicit question: **what do official data reveal when the joint evolution of population and total GDP in Africa south of the Sahara is compared with that of major Asian economies over the long run?**

2. Data and Methodology

2.1 Statistical Sources

The analysis relies exclusively on international institutional sources:

- **World Bank**:
  Nominal GDP in current US dollars, indicator *NY.GDP.MKTP.CD*.
- **United Nations (UN DESA)**:
  World Population Prospects 2024, total population as of 1 July, expressed in thousands of persons.

The observation period extends from 1950 to 2024, with particular attention paid to the years 1970–2008, which are decisive for the comparison of aggregate economic mass.

2.2 Definition of Africa South of the Sahara

In the databases of the World Bank and the United Nations, the region under study is identified under the institutional label *Sub-Saharan Africa*. In this article, the expression **“Africa south of the Sahara”** is used as a strict analytical equivalent of this category, without any modification of scope.

Both GDP and population figures for the region are used as published by the source institutions, without manual recomposition, in order to ensure transparency and reproducibility.

2.3 Analytical Framework

The analytical approach is based on:

- the joint examination of **population levels** and **aggregate GDP levels**;
- direct comparison with India and China;
- the absence of adjustments for purchasing power parity or constant prices, consistent with the objective of measuring **nominal economic mass as recorded in international national accounts**.

3. Population and Economic Mass: A Historically Misinterpreted Relationship

3.1 Long-Term Demographic Dynamics

Between 1950 and 2024, the population of Africa south of the Sahara increased from approximately 178 million to more than 1.25 billion inhabitants. This rapid growth is often presented as a central explanatory factor of the region’s relative economic weakness.

Such an interpretation, however, conflates **demographic expansion** with **structural incapacity to generate economic value**, a confusion that aggregate macroeconomic data allow us to correct.

3.2 The Central Stylized Fact: A Global Economic Mass

World Bank data show that:

- between **1976 and 1998**, and again in **2005, 2006, and 2008**,
  the combined GDP of Africa south of the Sahara was **higher than that of India**;
- between **1976 and 1991** (with the exception of 1989),
  it was also **higher than that of China**.

These results are neither theoretical constructions nor statistical artifacts. They are empirical facts directly observable in international national accounts.

4. A Critical Reassessment of the Population–GDP Relationship

4.1 A False Analytical Evident Truth

The idea that African demographic growth mechanically prevented the emergence of a significant economic mass is contradicted by recent history. With a population substantially smaller than that of China or India, Africa south of the Sahara nevertheless constituted, for several decades, a major global economic entity in nominal GDP terms.

This observation invalidates any mechanical relationship between rapid demographic growth and aggregate economic weakness.

4.2 The True Structural Break: The 1990s

The divergence observed from the 1990s onward does not result from a sudden acceleration of African population growth, but from exogenous structural transformations:

- rapid industrialization in China,
- asymmetric integration into global value chains,
- reconfiguration of international trade and financial regimes.

In this context, population alone cannot serve as a sufficient explanatory variable.

5. Long-Term Perspectives (2024–2100): Demographic Mass and Economic Potential

United Nations demographic projections indicate that Africa south of the Sahara will concentrate the majority of global population growth over the twenty-first century. This evolution is often interpreted as a risk factor.

In light of the historical results presented here, an alternative interpretation emerges: **a region that historically demonstrated the capacity to surpass major economies in nominal GDP, despite dynamic population growth, possesses considerable systemic potential**, provided that productive, institutional, and commercial structures evolve accordingly.

6. Analytical and Theoretical Implications

6.1 Implications for Economic Research

The analysis highlights the need to:

- reintegrate **African regional aggregates** into international macroeconomic comparisons;
- clearly distinguish between total GDP and GDP per capita;
- historicize trajectories rather than retroactively projecting contemporary explanatory frameworks.

6.2 Implications for the Analysis of Systemic Power

The combination of growing demographic mass and a historically demonstrated capacity to generate significant economic output confers upon Africa south of the Sahara a **latent systemic weight** that remains insufficiently theorized in current literature.

7. Conclusion

Based on official data from the World Bank and the United Nations, this article demonstrates that demographic growth in Africa south of the Sahara did not prevent the formation of a globally significant economic mass, including periods during which it exceeded the GDP of India and China.

This finding calls for a break with simplistic readings that oppose African population growth to economic performance. The central issue is not demography itself, but the systemic conditions under which human mass is transformed into economic value. A rigorous reexamination of the data thus reveals not a structurally marginal region, but one whose global economic role has been historically underestimated.

Transversal Conclusion

The transversal analysis of the demographic and economic data presented in this corpus leads to a central finding: the demographic growth of Africa south of the Sahara did not historically prevent the formation of a globally significant aggregate economic mass, including during periods in which its nominal aggregate GDP exceeded that of major Asian economies now perceived as structurally dominant.

This result invalidates any mechanical reading that establishes a direct and necessary link between strong demographic growth and aggregate economic weakness. It shows, on the contrary, that the determining issue is not population size in itself, but the systemic configuration within which that population is embedded: productive structures, modes of commercial integration, monetary and financial regimes, and positioning within global value chains.

The divergence observed from the 1990s onward cannot therefore be interpreted as the failure of an African demographic model, but rather as the product of profound systemic asymmetries in the organization of the global economy. The comparative trajectory with China and India underscores that rapid industrialization, technological accumulation, and the capture of industrial rents play a far more decisive role than demographic dynamics alone.

Looking toward the twenty-first century, as Africa south of the Sahara concentrates the bulk of global population growth, this reality takes on major strategic significance. Recent history shows that this region has already constituted a non-negligible global economic mass. Nothing, at the empirical level, precludes it from doing so again—or from surpassing previous levels—under appropriate institutional and productive conditions.

Ultimately, this work calls for an analytical refoundation. It invites us to think of Africa south of the Sahara not as a demographically “excessive” periphery, but as a systemic space whose economic potential depends less on its population size than on the way the global system transforms—or neutralizes—that population into economic value. It is at this level, and at this level alone, that the true scientific and political debate resides.